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ABSTRACT

The usefulness of the symbolic dimension for understanding educational administration is described in this paper, which discusses how the interpretivist rather than functional perspective is a more fruitful way of looking symbolically at organizations. The symbolic aspects of school culture, particularly its types of discourse, story, and script, are crucial in determining a school's effectiveness. A case study of an Israeli secondary school that implemented a school improvement initiative, the Shevach Project, in Israel, compared how the organizational script changed upon the arrival of the new local education department head. Negotiation with the head, who planned to create a selective, high status academic track, led to the development of a new script in which school excellence was decoupled from elitism. A conclusion is that the notions of discourse, story, and script are useful for understanding the change process and for organizational planning, and that the quality of effective schools' symbolic worlds differs from those of ineffective schools. (Contains 22 references.) (LMI)

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The Symbolic Dimension of Administration for Effective Schools

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David Gordon

The Symbolic Dimension of Administration for Effective Schools

During the 1980's organizational theorists discovered culture and symbols. A considerable body of writing appeared which dealt with the place of culture and symbols in organizations (e.g. Deal and Kennedy, 1982; Eisenberg and Riley, 1988; Feldman and March, 1981; Pondy, Frost, Morgan and Dandridge, 1983; Stablein and Nord, 1985;). Suddenly it became fashionable to talk and write about organizational stories, rituals, myths, scripts, etc. To a certain extent this did filter into the literature on educational organizations (e.g. Bates, 1987; Corbett, Firestone and Rossman, 1987; Erickson, 1987; Gordon, 1984; Lutz, 1986). However the influence of this approach has not been very marked. In particular, the importance of symbols and culture in promoting educational change has largely been ignored. Also, despite the use of the term "school ethos" by Rutter (et.al.) (1979) as a central factor determining school effectiveness, the cultural/symbolic perspective has not received much attention in research on school effectiveness.

Perhaps the most important reason for this derives from the sociology of educational research. The latter divides neatly into two clearly differentiated research paradigms - the positivistic, empirical tradition and the naturalistic, humanistic tradition · which stresses meaning and verstehen rather than manipulation and control. Research on school effectiveness and

educational improvement has been located largely within the first tradition.

Thus it has left meaning as a central notion to those concerned with teacher development and teacher narratives (Clandinin and Connelly, 1991) and to those concerned with critical pedagogy (e.g. Sullivan, 1990). But it is meaning which leads us to look at symbols and culture, and so deemphasizing meaning in school effectiveness and improvement research has resulted in the cultural/symbolic aspects of effectiveness and change being downplayed.

Smircich and Calas (1987) make a similar distinction between two approaches to organizational culture. The first they call the functionalist paradigm which is characterized by an objectivist vision of social reality, a positivist epistemology, a determinist view of human nature, and a regulatory view of society (p.233). The interpretive paradigm has a subjectivist vision of social reality, an antipositivist epistemology, and a voluntarist view of human nature. "Interpretivists do not share the functionalist's concern for prediction and control. Instead, interpretive research centers on documenting processes and experiences through which people construct organizational reality" (p.233).

Predictably enough, considering the dominance of the functionalist paradigm, most attempts to use cultural and symbolic concepts in the organizational (both general and educational) literature have been functionalist in nature. Effective organizations have good organizational sagas (Clark, 1972), say, so lets see how we administrators can create a good saga for our

organization, school, whatever. Firestone and Wilson (1985), for example, explicitly quote Smircich and argue that the functionalist approach is "easiest to reconcile with existing organizational research". (p.27) For this reason their paper "is more closely aligned to the (functionalist) approach" (p.27) This is clear from the way they address the question of how principals can influence "cultural linkages" in the school. They suggest answers like: the principal can "manage the flow of stories... in their schools" or can "create and manipulate symbols and rituals" (pp.16 - 17).

In the first section of this article I will enlarge on the distinction between these two perspectives, and will argue that the interpretivist perspective is a far more fruitful way of looking at organizations symbolically. I will then discuss the relevance of this view with regard to school effectiveness. In the second section I will present two illustrative examples taken from a large scale intervention project, known as the Shevach Project, with which I have been involved over the last four years. Finally, I will address the question of the relevance of the symbolic perspective for the administration of effective schools.

I: Discourse, Stories and Scripts

Organizations are created by people. They exist first and foremost in social space, rather than in some physically explicit setting. When a person relates to a particular organization, he/she is not relating to some objective, tangible entity but rather he/she is interpreting a whole set of behaviours, written texts, physical artifacts, in a particular way i.e. as an organization of a group of people. Organizations are thus a set of

common meanings for a certain group of people that regulate the way they relate to each other and interpret actions of others. They are, in brief, cultures which we become part of through continual acts of interpretation. In other words they become and remain real for us when we relate to certain sounds, movements and artifacts as symbols (this is precisely what we mean by acts of interpretation).

Instead of viewing organizations as having things like texts, stories, scripts, myths and rituals, in the same way as they have, say, budgets, hierarchies and presidents (this is the functionalist view), the interpretivist view regards organizations as the texts, stories, scripts, myths and rituals shared by a group of people. For researchers and change agents the texts, stories, etc., are not variables to be manipulated, but rather lenses through which we try to understand organizations, the people in them and the things of significance to those people.

The notion of significance emphasizes another difference between the functionalist and interpretivist perspectives. The functionalist researcher tends to be interested in stories and myths about the organization. The interpretivist perspective tends to be wider and to concentrate on stories, myths etc. which tell us how the organization's members view the world. This is particularly important when talking about schools. The interpretivist researcher is less concerned with the way organizational symbols tell us what the teachers believe about their particular school, the principal, the district etc. but rather what these symbols tell us about the teachers' view of the function of education, and the nature of learning and teaching.

In an article of this length I cannot discuss all the various cultural/symbolic concepts relevant to organizational theory. I will limit myself to three such concepts - discourse, story and script.

If one accepts, at least in part, the Whorf-Sapir thesis (Whorf, 1956) that language determines thought, then the nature of discourse in an organization will play a significant part in shaping the members' view of the world and their common belief system. Discourse supplies us with a vocabulary and a grammar and these define for us what is possible, and even what is conceivable. Our aims and our plans, our explanations of successes and failures, all are defined to a large extent by the everyday discourse we engage in in our organization. Describing or characterizing the discourse of an organization, in our case a school, goes a long way towards characterizing the school, its philosophy, mode of functioning, hidden curriculum and potential for change.

Organizational stories are, trivially enough, stories that people in organizations tell that recount incidents from an oral history of the organization's past , whose central characters are members of the organization (Martin, 1982). They have a point, a moral and tell members of the organization about the organization, and its philosophy. Scripts (Schank and Abelson, 1977) are "schema held in memory that describe events or behaviours (or sequences of events or behaviours) appropriate for a particular context... People in organizations know how to act appropriately because they have a working knowledge of their organizational world. They enact the "right" behaviors... because they retain a cognitive repertoire of scripts fitting a host of

organizational settings." (Gioia and Poole, 1984, p. 450)

At first glance, scripts and stories seem very different. Scripts are "boring" because they deal with routine, whereas stories are interesting and deal with unique one-time events. Yet Martin (1982,p.284) argues that the two concepts are interrelated. Stories have scripts embedded in them. The script is "the essential core... which remains after the details specific to a given incident are stripped away" (p.284). I would add that certain kinds of stories (of individuals or groups within an oranization) can <u>become</u> scripts, blueprints which "tell" the members that this is the <u>way</u> we do things around here, and this is also <u>why</u> we do things this way. A story when transformed into a script can become almost a mandatory view of the aims and mode of functioning of an organization.

Turning now to the notion of an effective school: the classic findings of the effective schools literature struck a responsive chord for functionalistic researchers because it seemed that the findings pointed to a simple, manipulatable list of "what works" behavioural components of such schools. However one can also look at those findings differently, and see them as indicating an integrated system of <u>beliefs</u> about education and the way schools should function. Effective schools <u>believe</u> that kids can learn, that it is the schools' responsibility to teach them, that schools are accountable for student achievement, that schools should be orderly places that stress learning, that they should monitor student progress etc. In my experience ineffective schools are that way not so much because they don't do certain things (like monitor progress, or stress order, for example) but rather because

their belief systems are different to that sketched out above (they don't believe, for example, that all kids can learn or that it is their responsibility to teach them all).

If this is correct, then symbolic aspects of school culture, and in particular the school's type of discourse and its dominant scripts, become crucial in determining a school's effectiveness. This is because the symbolic dimensions of school culture, as we have seen, have a profound influence on the school's belief system.

Limiting ourselves to the concepts of concern to us in this article, the question then arises: can we characterize the discourse and scripts of effective schools? I will relate to this question through an analysis of two case studies which derive from the Shevach Project.

II: The Shevach Project

The Shevach Project is an intervention similar in some ways to the Boston University Chelsea Project. Members of the Ben-Gurion University Education Department were granted a mandate by the Israeli Ministry of Education to run a holistic intervention program in all fifteen elementary, junior and senior high schools in a town I will call Rotem (pop. 25,000 approximately). This mandate was given for four years and stipulated that (1) during this time no other intervention would be allowed to enter the Rotem schools without the university's permission; (2) the university staff involved would be considered personally accountable for all results achieved in the Rotem system; (3) the intervention would be geared to improving the effectiveness of the Rotem elementary

schools in terms of pupil achievements in the basic subjects, and of the high schools in increasing the number of students who obtained matriculation certificates, which serve as entrance criteria for Israeli universities; (4) seeing that Rotem was a town going through serious urban problems, the intervention would in addition attempt to contribute to the reduction of negative migration out of Rotem (and even hopefully to the stage where Rotem would be transformed into a growing, developing town), this by improving the image of the Rotem education system (Ackerman, Flum, Gordon and Gorodetsky, 1989).

The strategy adopted by the intervention team was to spend the first year of the project performing both a naturalistic and quantitative evaluation of each of the Rotem schools. On the basis of these evaluations, problems in the various schools and in the system as a whole were identified, solutions were proposed and if accepted by the project's steering committee and the schools themselves, then the intervention team moved on to the second stage - implementation. We are now at the concluding part of this second stage, and have been concerned for the last six months in preparations for the third, final, phase-out stage - institutionalization.

The project is the largest of its type ever attempted in Israel. Thus it is a very complex one, and so within the framework of this article I will limit myself to those aspects of the project of direct relevance to the topic of symbolic dimensions of effectiveness. For this reason I will not list all the various problems we identified, nor all the proposals we made. Rather I will concentrate on part of our work in the senior high schools

(grades ten to twelve). It is here that the most striking illustrations of the symbolic dimensions of effective and ineffective schooling occurred.

II.1: Courses - The Magic Word

The Rotem high schools, like the high schools in about 50% of Israeli local districts, are comprehensive schools. The Israeli version of the comprehensive high school was established in the late 1960's. They were intended to promote the integration of pupils of all social and economic backgrounds by bringing them together in one school. From the very beginning, however, the goal of integration was thwarted because the comprehensive high school was conceived as a sort of federation of schools - academic grammar schools and vocational technological schools - and no attempt was made to bridge the gap between them. The decision which determined that the comprehensive school consist of an academic track and a vocational track guaranteed that it would adopt the structural characteristics peculiar to each of these types of schools. In particular, the comprehensive school perceived vocational training as it was generally perceived at that time. The school was expected to provide programs in specific areas (e.g. Mechanics, Electricity, Fashion, Clerical Work). These programs were intended to provide training which would prepare the graduate to enter the labor market and to work at the trade he/she had learned. The vocational trades were to be divided into different levels known as Masmam - lowest level; Masmar - medium level; Masmat - technological matriculation level; and each level was to lead to a different vocational work certificate, depending on the abilities

of the student. As a result of the foregoing, the vocational school became a "collection" of frameworks of varying statuses. The comprehensive high school inherited this structure. However, the structure now became part of a much larger school and turned the school into a bureaucratic framework which invested a great deal of energy in assigning youngsters to various tracks. The guiding principle became "fitting" youngsters to given structures rather than letting the youngsters' needs determine school structure.

Our original evaluation of the Rotem high schools indicated that the most serious problems of the system were located here. The number of students who graduated and were eligible for university was alarmingly low - 15% of the 12th grade cohort - approximately two fifths of the national norm. Most (over 90%!) of the students studying in the vocational tracks were so disenchanted by the prospects they envisaged being opened up for them by their graduating with a vocational certificate, that they simply didn't sit for their school-leaving examinations. On any reasonable measure of school effectiveness, the state of affairs in these high schools was simply catastrophic. We believed that these results did not so much reflect ineffective teaching in these schools, but rather pointed towards a fundamental flaw in the structure of the Israeli comprehensive school. This flaw has been hinted at above. As we saw it, these schools functioned as allocating devices or categorizing mechanisms, rather than institutions focusing on educating and teaching. Instead of promoting integration, the school sharpened the gap between the various types of students enrolled. As a result, pupils in the vocational tracks (generally of lower status) became alienated from the academic track and their

peers in that part of the school. Because of the emphasis on tracking and the technical problems connected with the proliferation of frameworks in a large school, the comprehensive school became much less flexible than originally conceived. The frameworks are extremely rigid and moving from one to another is difficult. This strengthens "labelling" phenomena.

In other words, comprehensive schools function poorly wherever situated. However, in our view their problems are exacerbated in the schools in small outlying towns like Rotem. Our proposed solution: a complete revamping of the high schools in Rotem - the local authorities, the schools and ourselves would attempt to develop a new revolutionary model for comprehensive education in the high schools. In this way, Rotem would act as an experimental site in Israel for a new type of school.

This proposal was accepted by the project's steering committee, but as often happens with proposals, it got modified on the way. First, at that stage, the staffs in the two high schools in Rotem objected very strongly to the proposal. It was clear that we had not succeeded in convincing them that the emphasis on allocation and categorization was a negative dimension of their functioning. On the contrary, they indicated that they didn't really believe that more student's could obtain matriculation certificates and thus it was essential to weed out those who couldn't succeed.

As a result, the local authorities suggested the following modification of the original proposal. One of the junior high schools in Rotem was in any event scheduled to be expanded into a full six-year junior and senior high school. The new model

would be tried out there first, as a pilot project. Afterwards, the other schools would develop their own versions of or variations on the new model. The staff of this school, none of whom had any experience in teaching in senior high schools, accepted the idea with enthusiasm, a new principal was "imported" into Rotem to run this school, and in particular, the senior section of it, and we got to work fleshing out the new model.

The model itself is a variation on the structure of the American high school, which attempts to come to grips with some of the problems that have been described for that structure in books like The Shopping Mall High School (Powell, Farrar and Cohen, 1985). The central notion in the model is that of a course, i.e. students can choose certain of the subjects they wish to study, and in the case of compulsory subjects the courses are built hierarchically so that the material for course X acts as a prerequisite for course Y, with the courses running from introductory to advanced levels. For American readers this may seem trivial, but within the Israeli context this is a revolutionary idea. It is in total contradiction to standard practice in which, as we have seen, a student is assigned to a class of students with whom he/she studies all or most subjects, the classes being set up on a streaming principle. In other words, students cannot advance from an introductory to an advanced level. They rather learn all chapters of a subject at the particular level stipulated for the class to which they have been assigned.

From the beginning it was clear the the notion of a "course" was a key word. The new high school developed its own vocabulary in which the word "course" featured prominently. The

notion of a course enabled the teachers to tap in on a conceptual system they were all familiar with from a different context - that of the university. Solutions to problems that arose were often solved by referring back mentally to their experiences as university students, where they had all experienced the "course" concept. This concept also enabled the teachers to envisage all students advancing through a curriculum from the elementary to reasonably advanced levels. This sense of "advancing through" countered tendencies to label students and to give up on them. For example, a local term entered the school's discourse - "an Alumim (name of the school) success story". This, I learnt, does not refer to a student who has achieved particularly high grades, but rather one who has progressed in his/her studies further than he/she would have in an ordinary school. Mentioning such a success story at a staff meeting is a sure fire way of triggering off smiles, agreeing nods and a general feeling of good cheer. Meetings are often summed up by counting the number of Alumim success stories in a particular class!

The word "course" and its associated discourse system were relevant for the other two Rotem high schools too. They were also expected to come up with proposals for a new structure. Their first ideas showed how strongly influenced they were by the dominant allocation discourse system. One school, for instance, proposed that a particular student category - what are known as Tag'at classes - be given more weight. Tag'at classes are made up of students who previously were defined as non-matriculation material, yet would be taught matriculation subjects and hopefully would obtain matriculation credits in at least some of these

subjects. An admirable idea - but limited, because it does not question the central role of allocation in the school structure. Now school energies were devoted to the "correct" identification of Tag'at students!

However the word was out that the new high school didn't have all these categories, and worked on the basis of courses. How could this be? What was the difference? Are courses really different? Endless discussions took place around these sorts of questions with once again the spontaneous invocation of the university analogy as an aid to understanding. (Remember, the teachers in the other schools were not newcomers to the senior high school system, and were deeply committed to the underlying assumptions of the classic Israeli comprehensive high school.) Slowly the idea that schools need not be based on allocation devices filtered through. The new structures that these schools came up with were hybrid ones - broad student categories still remain, but within these categories students are allowed to choose at which level they will learn different subjects, these choices can be different for different subjects and thus students can study different subjects with different students. They thus need not be assigned to a class with a predetermined level. Most important of all, two to three subjects are to be built on the basis of - courses!

One could argue that the notion of "discourse" is an unnecessary construct, artificially imported to explain this case, which is simply the story of a new idea filtering into a school system. I claim that the change in the discourse is absolutely

central to understanding this process of change. It is difficult to convey how important and dominant words like Masmam, Masmar, Masmat are in the world of the typical comprehensive high school, including the Rotem schools. One listens to teachers and hears sentences like: "Our Masmar classes are not true Masmar, they are actually Masmam kids and would be in Masmam classes if they lived somewhere else". This is reification gone berserk, which makes it almost inconceivable for most teachers to envisage that kids needn't be allocated to specific categories. But the reification begins with the word! The words tell the teachers that classification is the name of the game, and provide them with the labels. The change to a system which deemphasizes classification has come about slowly through the discussions in Rotem about the meaning of words. These discussions preceded any understanding of the ideational issues involved. In addition, people tend to characterize the difference between the Alumim school and the other high schools through the words rather than through the ideas that lie behind them. Any visitor to these schools will first of all sense the different discourses in the various schools. If a non-allocatory school structure makes for more effective schools, then effectiveness is increased first and foremost by changing discourse.

II.2: Changing Ya'akov's Story

In the second year of our project there was a municipal election in Rotem, the old party being ousted. The new administration brought in a new head for the local education department - Ya'akov. Ya'akov was prior to this a principal of a

high school in a neighbouring town. He had become famous as the principal who had turned this school round. He was fond of telling the story of how he did it. According to Ya'akov, when he had come to that school it had absolutely a zero number of students who completed their matriculation examinations. All the bright kids left the town and went to study in boarding schools. Ya'akov announced that he was going to establish a very selective, high status academic track. He set up this track in a special differentiated part of the school building, granted special privileges to these kids and devoted most of his energies to achieving results with them. His efforts paid off - the kids in this track did pass their matriculation examinations, the track grew in numbers over the years (althogh he admitted that these students always remained a minority), the status of the school improved and the sending of kids to boarding schools stopped. The moral of the story? Elitist education leads to psitive results <u>for all</u>. One must emphasize <u>excellence</u>.

It became clear almost immediately on his taking up office in Rotem that this story had become a dominant script for Ya'akov. He told us of his plans for the Rotem high schools - he intended transforming one of the comprehensive schools into a vocational school which would cater for the mass of pupils and building a new academic high school for the gifted youngsters of Rotem. This was the way to counter negative migration. He, together with the deputy mayor politically responsible for education, also initiated a new project in the elementary school system. This was the transformation of a school in one of the poor areas in Rotem into a special science school which would cater in addition for

gifted children from other cachement areas. Ya'akov and the deputy mayor - Amnon - laughingly called themselves the "terrible twins", and prided themselves on the speed at which they performed. Not the staid rhythms of education for them! They stressed that the establishment of the new elementary science school took two weeks from inception to completion (and they weren't exaggerating).

So we see that the same script characterized both new projects, and that it was strikingly similar to the story Ya'akov told of his previous post. We were very concerned with the way things were going. We saw the terrible twins as sincere, dedicated people who acted on impulse, didn't see all the ramifications of their ideas, and in the case of Ya'akov, had a naive belief in the efficacy of elitism. In our view, a town with a low percentage of matriculation graduates is in a completely different situation to one school with zero matriculation graduates. A successful solution in the latter case is inappplicable to the former. We also felt that a science school that creamed off all the bright kids in Rotem would have a very negative effect on the other schools, especially at a time when public support for the education system in Rotem was not high.

The next few months were devoted to extended discussions between Ya'akov, Amnon and ourselves. As we told them quite openly, we saw our job to convince them to change their minds. With regards to Ya'akov's high school proposal, the above story about the Alumim high school shows that we succeeded. We also managed to persuade Ya'akov and Amnon to modify their science school proposal and to announce that <u>all</u> elementary schools could become magnet schools, each with its own special emphasis, if they so pleased.

We succeeded in doing this, I would argue, because Ya'akov's story became intermingled with two other stories. The first was Amnon's story. At some stage in our discussion Amnon admitted that he was not comfortable with the idea of one high school for the mediocre and another for the bright kids. In an impassioned speech he told us that he himself had come to Rotem as a poor immigrant child, that because he didn't understand Hebrew had been diagnosed as dumb, had been assigned to a vocational class, and yet had managed to show "them" all that they were wrong, had gone on to study at a university, etc.

The second story was ours. We told Ya'akov and Amnon that when we had evaluated the high schools we had done a follow up study of graduates. Rotem is situated in an area with many big industries, and we had visited managers of these various industries to inquire about Rotem graduates. They had told us what so many industrialists all over the world have been telling educationalists - leave vocational training to us, teach our future workers how to think! This made a great impression on our twins.

Essentially this discussion between us, this clash of stories, led to Ya'akov and Amnon modifying the script they had derived from Ya'akov's story. We succeeded in persuading them to change their minds by offering them a new script, with very different educational implications, but sufficiently similar formally to the old script so that they could live with it and, over time, become very enthusiastic about it. In the new script, excellence was decoupled from elitism. Excellent schools needn't be schools that cater for special kinds of students, but rather are schools that offer special innovative kinds of programs or

approaches. The recipe for success was not to create elitist schools, but rather to create innovative ones that get the most out of all students. This is the way to fight negative migration and poor educational results.

III: Discourse, Stories, Scripts and Administration

The very mention of the word "administration" would seem to bring us back inevitably to ideas like those that Firestone and Wilson (1985) mention: managing the flow of stories, or creating and manipulating symbols and rituals i.e the functionalist perspective. To a certain extent this is correct - administration is functionalist by its very nature. However one must remember that the functionalist/interpretivist dichotomy was drawn very sharply at the beginning of this article in order to explicate an important distinction. In actual fact, the difference is not that clearcut. One can conceive of a perspective that is predominantly interpretivist, and yet has some functionalist elements. This is the tack I would like to take.

In neither of the two case studies described above did anybody, external change agent, local administrator or school principal consciously try to create or manipulate discourse or scripts. The notions of discourse, story and script were of use to us in understanding what was going on, why certain moves were successful and others not. They could have been used (and in other interventions since then have been used) as guidelines to estimate the probable outcome of a particular move. They could conceivably also be used as aids to plan particular moves (e.g. "we should try to encourage the development of an esoteric vocabulary to go along

with the introduction of innovation X"). Only in this latter case would they become part of a predominantly functionalist perspective, and even then "discourse", "story" and "script" are being conceived in far wider contexts than is usually the case.

It is in these three ways - as keys to understanding, as guidelines to estimate outcomes, as planning tools - that symbolic aspects of school life can be of help to the administrator. And if we accept the claim made previously that the <u>quality</u> of the symbolic world of effective schools is different to that of ineffective ones, then we can see why the "symbolic turn" is of particular importance for those committed to improving schools.

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